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THE COMPETENT TEACHER OF THE DISADVANTAGED.

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THE EFFECTIVE TEACHER OF THE DISADVANTAGED MUST POSSESS, FIRST OF ALL, THE QUALITIES DISTINGUISHING A GOOD TEACHER IN ANY SCHOOL IN OUR SOCIETY, AND AT THE SAME TIME, HE MUST BE COGNIZANT OF THOSE DIFFERING VALUES WHICH SEPARATE THE DISADVANTAGED SUB-CULTURE FROM THE MAINSTREAM OF OUR SOCIAL STRUCTURE. AN EFFECTIVE TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM CAN DEVELOP IN EACH TEACHER A KNOWLEDGE OF SPECIFIC MEANS OF HELPING THE DISADVANTAGEGEGE, A COMPREHENSIVE UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR EDUCATIONAL NEEDS, AND A SENSE OF RESPECT FOR THE DISADVANTAGED CHILD. A WELL-ORGANIZED INSERVICE PROGRAM SHOULD BE ESTABLISHED TO GIVE A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF THE VALUES, MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS, AND ACHIEVEMENT DESIRES OF MEMBERS OF THE DISADVANTAGED SUB-CULTURE. FUNDS ARE AVAILABLE TO PROVIDE MATERIAL RESOURCES, BUT IT WILL REMAIN THE TASK OF THE TEACHERS CONCERNED, THROUGH IN-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS, TO PROVIDE EFFECTIVE PLANNING, PROPER TIMING, AND A COOPERATIVE APPROACH IN MEETING THE EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS OF THESE CHILDREN. THIS SPEECH WAS DELIVERED TO THE ARKANSAS EDUCATION ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE ON THE DISADVANTAGED (LITTLE ROCK, FEBRUARY 22, 1966). (DA)

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The Competent Teacher of the Disadvantaged

-- Forrest Rozzell, Exec Sec., Ark Ed. Assn
February 22, 1966

I had a struggle with this speech. First, because the organization of the conference is such that it appeared to me that everything that I might logically say would have already been said. The second reason for my difficulty springs from a gnawing feeling that all the efforts being put forth in America today to help the disadvantaged are based upon cultural motivations and values which are not producing the results that we want, or think we want, in our society.

The "liberal" government programs which have been initiated in this century in America have dealt, directly and indirectly, almost exclusively, with material phenomena, principally money and income. Little attention has been given to programs which might affect the quality of life for our people, although some programs have done so as a side effect. None, except those dealing with civil rights, has been focused on the basic structural assumptions of our society which produced the problems in the first place. We have dealt with the poor and the jobless as individuals, or in some instances, with the conditions promoting unemployment or poverty in specific industries or geographic areas, but rarely with the underlying and persisting structure responsible for them.

The assumptions underlying these programs which have been validated by experience are: a concern for individuals and the conviction of their worth, the idea that government is the creation and property of the governed, and the faith that man is, if not inherently good, at least not evil. All the great American documents are firmly rooted in these traditions, and the vitality, stability and duration of our political process, built upon them, is testimony to their power. There is increasing suspicion that the fundamental weakness in our society is the assumption that men really are reasonable, or, stated in another way, the truth or the right need only be made known and men will follow it. Our experiences seem to demonstrate increasingly the invalidity of this assumption. It may still be that truth could make men free; however, that we can and will know truth and, knowing it, act upon it, remains an unsubstantiated assumption.

We have assumed that it is good to alleviate want, and experience validates this assumption; however, we have further assumed that the absence of want, in and of itself, creates satisfaction. Our experience seems to disapprove this assumption.

It is undeniably true that we have made significant progress in eradicating physical want in large segments of our population. Free public education has enabled "the masses" of our society to overcome handicaps of birth and to attain, and in some respects enjoy, a material standard of life unknown in the world previously. Diseases which have most often been the scourges of man in other times and places have been significantly checked. Barring catastrophe, we are well on our way in eliminating man's oldest enemy, hunger, in the United States. In the light of human history these accomplishments are nothing to take for granted. They may be our greatest triumphs, for no other society has ever attained them.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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They cannot be explained as mere accidents of history and natural resources, for many societies have been fortunately endowed but have failed even to attempt such accomplishments through lack of the guiding altruistic ideology which defines them.

On the other hand, just as these unquestioned "goods" are the product of our culture, so also are its failures, for they, too, spring from our definitions of man and his place in the world. Our root problem lies in our credo that man is motivated by self-interest and is measured by his accumulation of wealth. This credo ignores the cardinal sin that greed is a social force so dangerous that it demands rigid control at all times.

Our dilemma is simply this: Individualism, self-interest, and judgment of the worth of men according to their accumulation of wealth act as motive forces for a society only so long as most of its members cannot attain that wealth. Once an affluent economy has been created, one in which most people do share in the prosperity and abundance, such criteria no longer provide goals and satisfactions and, in addition, create discontents which cannot be materially alleviated. The evidence among us of social and psychological discontent is wide spread. And it is imperative that we recognize that the discontent is probably more prevalent among the "advantaged" than the "disadvantaged".

Psychologically, there is evidence of massive failure of health and stability. Drug addiction is an increasing problem. Alcoholism blights the lives of an unknown number of our citizens. Over 19,000 Americans commit suicide annually and it is a leading cause of death among the young. Crime and delinquency are wide-spread. Family disintegration is increasing. When these phenomena are combined with the racial revolution which is engulfing America and those groups which seem to view many aspects of our society with hatred and paronoiac suspicion the existence of massive discontent is a logical conclusion.

The explanation for social maladjustment in an affluent society is simple: material goods, of themselves, are incapable of creating human satisfaction. All men have gods. In a materialistic society, things are gods. Surely it is not necessary to reiterate the domination of American political and social life by the commercial community and commercial values. If we worship things, and if things are symbols of ourselves (and we do and they are) then we are worshiping ourselves. The trouble springs from the fact that no one really can be his own god, for,then, we know him too well.

Those among the materially poverty stricken have been left behind in the grab for things. The relative deprivation of these people -- surrounded by a society of sparkling abundance and overwhelmed by its demands that all must have -- can be nothing short of frightful in its pain and frustration. For if one must have cars, and television, and boats, and beautiful clothes and handsome companions to be successful and satisfied (assuredly this is the most widely advertised message of our culture), what can one think of one's self if he cannot provide food for his family or a roof over his own head.

But, as I have already stated, discontent is not confined to the disadvantaged. Many who have acquired money and things and who by definition in our society are "successful" are not satisfied.

As a consequence, they have concluded that something must be fearfully wrong with a world where one has arrived and yet, somehow, loses anyway.

We are in an individualistic society in an age when the interdependence created by our complicated social structures has made individualism obsolete. Ours is a materialistic society at a time when the very success we have enjoyed in the production and distribution of material goods has made them useless as providers of satisfaction. We are a liberal society, in a condition where attempts to alleviate human needs (certainly morally valid in itself) will only inflame others. And we are left, at the end, with nothing larger than ourselves.

Undoubtedly the question in your mind at this time is: "but what does all this have to do with a competent teacher of the disadvantaged?" To me, it has everything to do with my subject. Every member of the education profession is associated with a cause which is larger than self and which can transcend the materialistic motivations of our culture. It means that if our efforts to help the disadvantaged are based upon purely materialistic motivations, even success will produce frustrations and failures. It means that non-material motivations will not be ignored in the efforts of the competent teacher. It means that the competent teacher of the disadvantaged will be as much concerned with what man can be as with what man can do and have, if not more so. It means that the competent teacher of the disadvantaged needs a comprehensive understanding not only of the sub-cultures of the disadvantaged but also of the prevailing culture of our society--including its weaknesses as well as its strengths.

In teaching the disadvantaged, as in other educational and healing arts, the capacity for hurting always exceeds the ability to heal. This fact underscores the imperative need for competent professional personnel.

In our present mood of guilt and panic over the neglect of our disadvantaged youth, many commentators are urging us to inaugurate massive new programs of vocational training. While this answer is consistent with the materialistic motivations of our culture it is subject not only to the philosophical weaknesses of materialistic motivation, which I have already dealt with, but also to pragmatic weaknesses. The basic task of educational programs for the disadvantaged, as well as the advantaged, must be to improve the literacy and alertness and scientific mindedness of youth so that they will be prepared to absorb vocational training when they enter the labor force. This is essential because technological change is transforming occupational specialties with increasing rapidity. The competent teacher of the disadvantaged recognizes that the fundamental task is to work out the most effective division of labor among the many kinds of educational agencies that our rich and complex society possesses.

A basic fact which must be recognized and understood, in my opinion, is that a competent teacher is not necessarily a competent teacher of the disadvantaged. To teach disadvantaged children effectively is to display the highest professional competence. Few jobs are more demanding. The essential precondition for teaching disadvantaged children is a deep understanding of the cause of their behavior. The teacher must, therefore, possess both a general background needed for teaching anywhere and a knowledge and understanding of the circumstances of life for the disadvantaged.

The preparation of teachers for this service is a continuous process. Some aspects can be supplied in advance of teaching, but virtually all the necessary insights require consolidation and deepening after teaching has begun.

The pre-service program of teacher education should seek to develop in each student a sense of genuine respect and empathy for the children that he will teach. To this end, he should become fully sensitive to the relationship between experience and character. He should recognize that every child is born with considerable potentials and that some children have great obstacles to overcome in order to develop them. He should know that under the proper conditions almost any child shows himself quite capable of learning. He should learn the importance of being approachable and of enjoying a close relationship with disadvantaged young people. He should expect the children to sense quickly whether he likes them and whether he believes that they can succeed, and he should know how crucial his judgment will be to his chances for success.

A competent teacher of the disadvantaged recognizes that all disadvantaged children, although sharing a common sub-culture, are individuals; therefore, individualized instruction is essential.

The education of teachers for the complex array of problems involved in teaching the disadvantaged can never be regarded as finished. Successful teachers go on learning indefinitely, and their teaching is endlessly enriched by the experiences which come to them while teaching. Thus, the in-service aspect of teacher education must be stressed.

In-service education should enable teachers consistently to improve their understanding of their pupils. Teachers should acquaint themselves with the living conditions of their pupils and try to relate their knowledge of sociology and psychology to those conditions.

The competent teacher of the disadvantaged is well trained in sociology, anthropology, and psychology, and has a pervading sensitivity to educational, social, and psychological needs and aspirations of the poor and disadvantaged. The competent teacher of the disadvantaged recognizes that the values of low income families may be quite different from those held by middle and upper income families. Unlike the middle class, the lower social classes are not strongly motivated by a desire to get ahead (the materialistic motivation which so dominates the culture of the middle and upper income families). No doubt many wish for higher status but unlike members of the middle class, they often think that it is not possible to attain. (Awareness of the possibility of attainment is being aroused by new programs, but too often the means for attainment offered are over-simplified and superficial with too little emphasis upon the price which the individual must pay in the form of effort.)

The competent teacher of the disadvantaged recognizes that the teacher is the key; knows some specific ways of helping the disadvantaged; recognizes the need for maintaining basic educational objectives; has a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics and educational needs of the disadvantaged; and is acutely aware of the opportunities and pitfalls involved in teaching the disadvantaged.

The competent teacher of the disadvantaged, regardless of grade level or subject matter taught, can enter his classroom with skills and insights that will allow him to do more than merely purvey information. From the very beginning of the educational process, the competent teacher of the disadvantaged will challenge young minds to examine the real meaning of "the dignity of man", "the rule of law", the principles of freedom, justice and equality; "the good life", "success"; and individual responsibility. The competent teacher of the disadvantaged will strive to develop in each child an image of himself as a person of worth, an understanding of where he is; where he is going; and what he can best do under these circumstances. He will strive to develop in each child the ability to solve new problems by using the accumulated intellectual power of the human race through the democratic method.

The competent teacher of the disadvantaged faces an awesome responsibility. Funds are available to provide the material things which can help him assume this responsibility; however, regardless of the abundance and adequacy of the material resources, the desired success cannot be achieved without comprehensive planning, thorough preparation, proper timing, and the cooperative approach. This is the fundamental purpose of an in-service education program for teachers. There was a time when professional growth, or an in-service education program, as it applies to teachers, was merely a desirable objective. Today, however, it is an imperative -- especially in developing and implementing effective educational programs for the disadvantaged.

No teacher of the disadvantaged can truly be classified as competent unless he is effectively involved in an in-service education program which is systematically concerned with:

1. Helping direct the sweeping social changes, which are designed to help the disadvantaged, along the most just, most hopeful and least destructive paths.

2. Helping to develop a more adequate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses not only of the dominant culture but also the sub-cultures from which the disadvantaged come.

3. Developing ways to adjust the educational programs to the ways of life of the disadvantaged whom he is trying to reach.

4. Learning more about the characteristics and educational needs of the disadvantaged.

5. Finding ways and means of adapting methods and techniques to fit the characteristics and needs.

6. Learning how not only to do something for the disadvantaged but also to help the disadvantaged do more for themselves.

7. Increasing the communication between school and community.

8. Developing mutual confidence between the school personnel and the parents of the disadvantaged.

9. Creating an understanding on the part of all concerned that results are not likely to be quick and miraculous. There is no such thing as instant education.

Genuinely successful school programs for disadvantaged children will require more than open doors, warm hearts and a sympathetic reception. Good intentions alone are a pathetically inadequate response to the professional and technical problems involved in meeting their educational needs. Only through systematically planned and executed programs of in-service education can we hope to intelligently design the school policies, programs, and facilities needed to meet existing realities. Only through in-service education programs can we develop the understanding, temperament and competence which is required to treat every pupil according to his needs with respect and seriousness. Only through in-service education programs can we enable each staff member who is dealing with the needs of the disadvantaged to work at the level of his highest competence.

Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act teachers can be paid for the time they devote to in-service educational programs designed to help the disadvantaged. This is the way it should be. However, the competent teacher of the disadvantaged will have a higher motivation than the money or the college credits he can earn. He will have genuine concern, respect and empathy for the children he will teach. He will be genuinely concerned with helping the disadvantaged to make a life and not just a living. He will strive to develop in each child an understanding of where he is; where he is going; and how he can best overcome the adversities which he faces. He will strive to develop in each child the ability to solve new problems by using the accumulated intellectual power of the human race through the democratic method. Any teacher who believes that this last objective is not attainable by the disadvantaged has no business teaching the disadvantaged.

We already know many of the things to be done and how to do them. But we lack the bold leadership required for speedy change, the leadership to organize available personnel and resources to make the greatest impact in the shortest amount of time. We need more leaders who know what they are doing, believe in it firmly, and are willing to fight for it.

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